

Roger Casale: America is back but democracy is fragile

Europeans often forget that Americans look West, as well as East. To those who matter in Washington DC, Europe looks weak. That doesn't stem the flow of perorations about the transatlantic relationship. But nostalgia is no substitute for a forward strategy.

It will take more than declarations about "strategic autonomy" to overcome scepticism in both the White House and the State Department about Europe's true capabilities.

NASA's Mars mission is a case in point. The European Space Agency's role will be to 'pick up the (rock) pieces' and return them to Earth. The Americans are the ground-breakers, Europeans the scavengers. Is this a metaphor for the transatlantic relationship?

Is Europe anymore ready to defend its borders than it is to put a robot on Mars? Spending money on the military is not the same as having hardware that can be deployed effectively. Europe has some star players, but does Europe know how to play as a team?

At the Munich Security Conference, President Biden sought to reassure America's allies with the words "America is back." But did America ever really leave? Trump took the USA out of the WHO and the Paris Climate Agreements. He did not withdraw from the NATO alliance.

Historic ties

Biden also referred to NATO's historic role as the cornerstone of peace. He also made clear his focus is the challenges for this generation not the last. A kind word does not mean respect. That will only come when Europe increases not just spending but also capability.

What can be said about the economic ties that bind? In value terms the US-EU trade relationship is still the largest in the world. But patterns of trade can change quickly. The EU does more trade in good with China than it does with the US.

In November, 2020, EU Trade Commissioner, Valdis Dombrovskis described the current period in EU-US trade relations as one of "extraordinary turbulence". Biden may be flying the plane but that does not mean Europeans should start unbuckling their seat belts:

Will Biden leave EU steel and aluminium tariffs in place or work with the EU to tackle unfair competition from China? What will happen to Biden's pledge to "buy America"? Will European's ambition to assert "digital sovereignty", be perceived by Americans as an asymmetric tax policy designed to target their own digital companies?

Old and new

Henry Kissinger once remarked that "the old order is disintegrating while the shape of its replacement is highly uncertain. Everything depends on some conception of the future."¹

¹ American Foreign Policy, Three Essays, Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Can the US and European politicians of today still articulate a shared vision of the future, given the constraints imposed on them by their respective constituencies? How should we judge the success of the partnership between the USA and Europe given its past achievements?

The mood music has changed in Washington, but how will things actually change within the institution of the transatlantic relationship? Who has a vision for how the relationship might look tomorrow and how to get there? Is there still time?

Some of the answers to these questions will depend not on what happens on Mars, or with military spending or even on developments in global trade.

The enduring strength of the transatlantic relationship has always been the fact that it institutionalises not just a common set of interests - peace, security and prosperity - but also a common set of values.

Community of values

Zbigniew Brzezinski once said that “there is something transcendental about shared values that should not be subordinated to tactical requirements”².

The partnership between Europe and America has survived by adapting to changed circumstances while staying true to its core ambitions. That is the key to its resilience.

Without NATO, it is hard to imagine EU coming into being in the first place, let alone being able to expand into East and Central Europe. The reverse is also true - or at least Vladimir Putin seems to think so. Break up the EU and you undermine NATO – hence Russia’s well-documented support for Brexit and many right-wing populist movements in Europe.

What is easy to miss is that the European Union is more than just a territorial union. In fact it is a triple union – a union of nations and states (Europe 1), a Europe of markets and money (Europe 2), and a union of citizens (Europe 3).

Europe 3 – the Europe of citizens - is the key to the resilience of the European project. That is why it is so important to defend and strengthen the civic space in Europe, as a key strategic objective for the transatlantic alliance.

In the 1950s and 60s, the creation of the Coal and Steel Community and the Common Market, served the twin purpose of securing peace, and rebuilding the European economy. This was the Europe of nations and states, whose architects were Adenauer and de Gaulle, Henri Spaak, Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi – Europe One.

It is hard to imagine even right-wing populists in Europe like Orban, Salvini or Marine Le Pen, abandoning Europe One. In fact some of them would like to go back there, to the

² New American Strategies for Security and Peace, The American Prospect

Europe of Nations de Gaulle spoke of in his dreams: a Europe of shifting alliances, powerful in defence of fundamental values such as liberty, stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals.

Europe 1, 2 and 3

Europe One was constructed in the permissive environment of the so-called Golden Years of the post-war economic boom – rising living standards rise, expanding public services, low inflation and full employment. Europe was rebuilt not as a federal union as the visionaries in the resistance movement had hoped but Europeans – at least those in the West of Europe – knew they were free again. America invested heavily through the Marshall Plan and its military commitments in Europe (“boots on the ground”).

The miraculous rebirth of the European nation states after the trauma of the Holocaust, fascism and WWII was a triumph of the transatlantic relationship. West Europeans enjoyed rising prosperity and security. Americans saw a Europe that could do what it was supposed to do – act as a bulwark against the USSR and a trading partner for the United States.

As the post-war social contract broke down, a new international paradigm emerged which also driven strongly from Washington – in fact it later became known as “the Washington Consensus”. Drastic and sudden reforms were required to curb deficits, liberalise markets and control inflation and these measures were applied not just in the developing world but also in Europe – in 1976, the UK government had its economic policy vetoed by the IMF.

The name Washington Consensus suggests it was imposed by America, but this is misleading. There was a transatlantic consensus and by the early 1990 it seemed as if the Europeans were the most hard-line advocates of the new orthodoxy. Structural reforms became hard-wired into the European project, through the Growth and Stability Pact.

This was the birth of Europe 2, not the Europe of nations and states, but the Europe of markets and money. In 1987, the Single European Act was passed, creating an (as yet incomplete) single market liberalising the movement for capital, goods, services and people and making the world, so its proponents claimed, “safe for freedom and democracy”.

As Europe was reborn for a second time after WWII, the Berlin Wall came down leading not just to the unification of Germany but an end to the East-West division of Europe.

Today, Europe is once again in a process of profound crisis and transformation, exacerbated by the COVID- 19 pandemic, the social and economic consequences of the lockdown and the challenge to the rule of law, democracy and human rights, core values of the European project, posed by the rise of populism, nationalism and right-wing extremism.

The pandemic masks the fact that this was an accident waiting to happen. For the thirty years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, democratic consolidation and the strengthening of civic space took second place to the demands of reforming the economy.

Despite huge gains in per capita income in some parts of Europe, the distribution of economic benefits as a result of liberalisation has been very uneven. Today we experience the backlash from those who feel left out or left behind. Democracy is fragile.

For a while though it did feel in 1989, as if the future would belong not just to the bankers but also to the bridge-builders to the campaigners who had brought changes about.

Or as Vaclav Havel, put it at the time: “Could not this be a time for our country to be the scene of events to pave the way toward a better future for the whole of Europe?”³

As a new generation tore down the walls and barriers that separated East from West in Europe, they cried “We are the people”. Words that were soon became “We are one people!” deflecting the impetus for a deeper change into the drive towards unification.

On both sides of the Atlantic “there is no other way” became a mainstream trope. Instead of seizing the collapse of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence as an opportunity for democratic renewal; too many bought the “end of history” myth. But history has caught with up “the end of history era” and brought it to an end.

There is always another way in a democracy. The failure by elites to recognise this may partly explain why we face such powerful populist upsurges in Europe and America today.

Brexit and Trump

Much has been written about voter manipulation during the Brexit referendum⁴. But it wasn't Facebook, it was 17.1 million UK citizens who actually voted to leave.

The fact that the *Vote Leave* campaign told lies does not matter as much as the fact that some people believed them. We have to ask, why the lies were believed.

The lies had currency not as products of reason but as articles of faith. It felt good to be told and to believe that life would be better if Britain left the EU. But there was no evidence that this would be the case, nor have we yet heard any plausible argument for how it could be.

In contrast, the Remain Campaign battered the British population with facts, statistics and arguments about what was good for them. The campaign was in broadcast mode from the outset. At the first press conference, even journalists were not allowed to ask questions.

Nobody from the Remain side wanted to listen to what voters, particularly those from disadvantaged communities had to say. That made things much easier for Vote Leave.

³The Safeguard of Stability and Peace in the Euro-Atlantic Region, in *European Security: Beginning a New Century*, eds. General George A. Joulwan & Roger Weissinger-Baylon, papers from the *XIIIth NATO Workshop: On Political-Military Decision Making*, Warsaw, Poland, 19–23 June 1996.

⁴ ‘If you’re not terrified of Facebook, you haven’t been paying attention’, Carole Cadwalladr, *The Guardian*, 26 July 2020

In fact, had the British Government organised a public consultation in 2015 to find out what the single issue in that referendum should be, Europe would not have featured in the top ten wishes on the list. The trick played by the Eurosceptics was to offer a referendum, and then to make that referendum about Europe. That opened a Pandora's box of issues.

A referendum campaign is an opportunity to voice every imaginable gripe and grievance - concerns about lack of economic opportunity, access to public services, the Prime Minister of the day, migration, council services, even the composition of the England football team. None of these were addressed. It is not a way to decide the destiny of a country.

What happened next had very little to do with Europe, Nobody on either side of the debate was very interested in or seemed to know much about how the European Union was run. Google searches from the UK for the words European Union spiked one hour after voting stopped and the exit polls had indicated that the UK had voted to leave.

Brexit was not so much the cause as a symptom of a decline in British democracy. There has been an erosion of trust not just in Westminster and Whitehall, but in many of the UK's institutions, including mainstream media such as the BBC, the church and the Royal family.

It is difficult to restore trust in politics once it breaks down. Combined with the decline of deference, many in politics, from both sides of the political divide, are left knowing what they right thing do so is, but not how to do it and still be re-elected.

Both the Labour and the Conservative parties in the UK have been captured by their extremes. This has been facilitated by the fact that it is a tiny minority of the population in Britain who play an active role in the life of political parties. It leads to polarisation, to the fury not the wisdom of the crowd, and undermines the democratic foundations of society.

The strength of a democracy should is measured not just by how far it respects the will of the majority, but critically how it at the same protects the rights and interests of minorities.

Nowhere was democratic backsliding more evident than in the failure by the Conservative government to immediately give comprehensive and unilateral guarantees to the 3.4 million EU citizens resident in the UK at the time of the referendum.

We also saw it in the way the Government shut down parliament to avoid debate on the Withdrawal Agreement, has given itself extraordinary powers to pass legislation without proper scrutiny. And we see it in the way in which public contracts are handed out to companies run by individuals with close personal ties to members of the government.

And yet the Conservative government retains its popularity in public opinion polls.

There is clear evidence of Donald Trump's complicity in the sickening scenes of violent insurrection that took place in Washington DC on 6 January. However, over-whelming number of Republican voters still want him to run again as their candidate in 2024.

To understand why this is the case, requires a level of empathy that many political insiders, analysts and commentator don't seem to have. It's not just that his supporters seem to like Donald Trump. Those who turned out not just to answer his call to arms at the Capitol on 6 January but also to vote for him in November, love Donald Trump. They identify with Donald Trump. They feel validated by Donald Trump. Some would take a bullet for Donald Trump.

The dilemma for policy-makers was painfully on display when the Senate Republican Leader, Mitch McConnell, denounced Trump after voting not to impeach him. It now appears he would be willing to endorse a Trump candidature in 2024 if he is the nominee.⁵

Civic space

In Europe, even within the European Union, we are witnessing a systematic effort by some Governments, through legislation as well as the use of administrative and fiscal measures, to deny human rights, curb civil liberties, undermine the rule of law, abuse media freedom and stifle protest. Hungary and Poland are but the most noticeable examples.

The COVID emergency is exacerbating these tendencies. In some cases, states are taking advantage of the pandemic to pass laws that are unrelated to the need to protect public health. There is a ratchet effect whereby powers that are introduced to control the spread of the virus are left in place indefinitely and used for other purposes, including surveillance.

At the same time as repressive measures have increased, we have witnessed inspiring examples of an awakening of citizen activism, most notably in Belarus and Russia but also in many EU member states such as Poland, Hungary and Romania.

Joseph Stiglitz has argued that "countries around the world that believe in democracy... will have to build a new international order, one that does not rely on US leadership. In this crucial moment, Europe's full-throated support for democracy and human rights is vital."⁶

How is such a vision to be achieved in practice? How can states embrace citizen activism without placing the institutions of representative democracy in jeopardy?

Some of the answers to these questions might be found by returning to the experience of those who challenged communist rule in Europe in the 1980s. This generation understood what it meant to no longer be the victims of history but instead to become the protagonists.

It may be that from the depths of the pandemic, a new paradigm will emerge, which places citizens at the heart of the recovery. Citizens have been on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19 and are the key to what will come after it.

⁵ ['Mitch McConnell says he's absolutely support Trump in 2024 if he was the party's nominee'](#), The Guardian, 26 February 2021

⁶ Lessons of the American election for Europe and the World, Joseph Stiglitz, The Progressive Post, 6 November 2020

Huge change is on the way in how we organise our lives and live together in society and citizens will be at the forefront of these developments. Citizens are driving the demand for an European Health Union and a Universal Basic Income.

Civil society organisations are monitoring human rights abuses during the pandemic and consulting with their constituencies about the deployment of the recovery funds. Cities like Amsterdam are experimenting with new economic models of sustainable development.

Revitalising our democracy at every level of society will be the key to ensuring the resilience of the European model and the stability of the transatlantic relationship.

This must mean going beyond traditional forms of consultation and ensuring that citizens have a greater voice in shaping the agenda, and contributing to decision-making processes.

Without such radical change to how we do politics, opening the space for real citizen engagement, decision makers will neither understand what policies to adopt nor how to win consensus for their implementation.

Autocratic leaders seize their opportunity when consensus breaks down. They shut down the civic space by undermining freedom of the press and the rule of law, silencing the voice of citizens, violating human rights, and weakening democracy.

A collapse of the civic space leads to an irreversible decline in sovereignty and in Europe's capacity and reputation as well as to a weakening of the transatlantic relationship.

The challenge is to recognise this is happening and to take action before it is too late to do anything about it.

After a year and more of draconian lockdown measures, citizens will expect governments to earn their consent. The methodology, technology, and examples of best practice are available to sustain a new era of citizen-led democracy.

What has been lacking on both sides of the Atlantic is the political will. Prevarication about the Conference on the Future of Europe is a case in point.

Biden's election should open a new chapter in transatlantic relations, focussed on investing in civil society, the empowerment of citizens and the safe-guarding of civic space.

It would be the finest tribute to the achievements of past generations and the best way to secure a solid democratic foundation for the next ones to build on.

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